The Reality of Copyists' Errors (B. Thompson and E. Lyons)

Print Study
Author's Bias | Interpretation: conservative

From time to time, a person reading the Bible will come across names or numbers in two or more passages that seem to contradict each other. After thoroughly studying the context of the passages in order to make certain that the assumed contradiction is not just a misunderstanding of the text, the reader then concludes that the passages do indeed contradict one another. For example, 2 Kings 24:8 says that Jehoiachin succeeded his father as the nineteenth king of Judah at the age of **eighteen**, whereas 2 Chronicles 36:9 informs us that he was "**eight** years old when he became king." The honest person must admit that these two passages are in disagreement. The question that must be asked is: Do such disagreements indicate that the Bible is not the inspired Word of God? No, they do not.

The fact is, differences within two or more biblical accounts **may** be the result of copyists' errors. Oftentimes, modern man forgets that whenever duplicates of the Old Testament Scriptures were needed, copies had to be made by hand—a painstaking, time-consuming task requiring extreme concentration and special working conditions. In time, an elite group of scribes, known as the Masoretes, arose just for this purpose. In their respected work on critical biblical issues, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Norman Geisler and William Nix observed:

> The Masoretic period (flourished c. A.D. 500-1000) of Old Testament manuscript copying indicates a complete review of established rules, a deep reverence for the Scriptures, and a systematic renovation of transmission techniques…. Copies were made by an official class of sacred scribes who labored under strict rules (1986, pp. 354,467; cf. also pp. 371,374,380).

The Masoretes went above and beyond the "call of duty" in order to make the most accurate copies humanly possible. Out of respect for the Word of God, these copyists took numerous precautions to "guarantee" precise duplication. As Eddie Hendrix noted:

> When a scribe finally completed the laborious task of copying it with a catalog of detailed information about that book, the catalog listed the number of verses, words, and letters that should occur in the book. The catalog also listed the word and the letter that should fall in the middle of the book. Such minute checks contributed to a high degree of copying accuracy (1976, p. 5).

Anyone who has studied the exacting conditions under which the Masoretes worked, and the lengths to which they went to ensure fidelity in their copies of the Scriptures, could attest to the fact that their goal was to produce accurate copies—even to the point of reproducing errors already present in the much older copies from which they were working. The Masoretes were some of the world's greatest perfectionists.

They were, nevertheless, still human. And humans are prone to make mistakes, regardless of the care they take or the strictness of the rules under which they operate. The copyists' task was made all the more difficult by the sheer complexity of the Hebrew language, and by the various ways in which potential errors could be introduced (even inadvertently) into the copying process. There are at least seven important ways in which a copyist might change the text accidentally, including such actions as:

(a) omissions of letters, words, or whole lines;

(b) unwarranted repetitions;

(c) transposition (the reversal of two letters or words);

(d) errors of memory;

(e) errors of the ear;

(f) errors of the eye; and

(g) errors of judgment (Geisler and Nix, 1986, pp. 469-473).

Such errors, especially before the Masoretes came on the scene, could account for the alleged discrepancies in various parts of the Bible (cf. 1 Kings 4:26; 2 Kings 8:26; 2 Chronicles 9:25; 22:2). For example, biblical scholar Gleason Archer has stated: "Even the earliest and best manuscripts that we possess are not totally free of transmissional errors. Numbers are occasionally miscopied, the spelling of proper names is occasionally garbled, and there are examples of the same types of scribal error that appear in other ancient documents as well" (1982, p. 27). Do copyists' errors appear in other ancient documents, too? Most assuredly! Corruptions in the writings of the Greek classics are very common. Take, for instance, the secular works of Tacitus. They are known to contain at least one numerical error that Tacitean and classical scholars have acknowledged as a copyist's mistake (Holding, 2001). These scholars recognize that at some point in history, a copyist accidentally changed a number (from CXXV to XXV). Why is it, then, that biblical critics will not recognize the same possibility when supposed discrepancies are found in the Bible? Just as those who copied secular historical documents sometimes misspelled names and numbers, scribes who copied the Bible from earlier texts occasionally made mistakes. The complexity of the Hebrew language and its alphabetic/numeric system no doubt served as an even greater challenge for the scribes.

Errors of the ear also may have played a part. If a scribe was writing the text as it was being read to him, the reader actually may have **said** one thing but the scribe **heard** another. Other differences might have been the result of an error of memory. A scribe may have looked at an entire line, memorized it, and copied it from memory without looking at it a second time during the copying process. When he went to write one of the numbers in the two passages, however, his memory failed him; what he **thought** he remembered the original text having said was not what it **actually** said. Such could have been the case in 2 Chronicles 22:2, where it says that Ahaziah was 42 years old when he became king of Judah. In light of other Scriptures (2 Kings 8:17, 26), one understands that Ahaziah could not have been 42 when he inherited the throne, because this would make him two years older than his father. The correct reading of Ahaziah's age is "twenty-two" (2 Kings 8:17), not "forty-two." When one stops to consider the extremely poor conditions under which most copyists worked (poor lighting, crude writing instruments, imperfect writing surfaces, etc.), it is not difficult to understand how inadvertent errors such as these might occur from time to time.

Is God to be blamed for these errors? Although some would like to think so, one must remember that an author is not responsible for errors that are found in copies made of his book. God cannot be blamed for errors made by those who have copied the Scriptures in the distant past. Nor can He be held accountable for those who continue to print copies of the Bible today. It is not God' s fault that various publishing companies today have printed translations of the Bible containing such things as misspelled words, incorrect numbers, duplicate words, etc. Would it be God's fault if we decided to copy the whole Bible by hand, with the result being a copy of the Bible containing some misspelled names and a few wrong numbers? Certainly not! God is not responsible for the errors made by those who produce copies of the Bible.

But why do we not possess infallible copies of the infallible originals of the Bible books? Archer has observed that it is

> because the production of even one perfect copy of one book is so far beyond the capacity of a human scribe as to render it necessary for God to perform a miracle in order to produce it. No reasonable person can expect even the most conscientious copyist to achieve technical infallibility in transcribing his original document into a fresh copy.... But the important fact remains that accurate communication is possible despite technical mistakes in copying (1982, p. 29).

Indeed, **accurate** communication **is** possible despite technical mistakes in copying. In the more than two decades during which Apologetics Press has published its monthly journal, *Reason and Revelation*, we never have had someone suggest that as a result of an inadvertent mistake they were unable to comprehend the meaning, or detect the intent, of an article. Cannot the same be said of the Bible? Surely it can! Archer concluded:

> Well-trained textual critics operating on the basis of sound methodology are able to rectify almost all misunderstandings that might result from manuscript error…. Is there objective proof from the surviving manuscripts of Scripture that these sixty-six books have been transmitted to us with such a high degree of accuracy as to assure us that the information contained in the originals has been perfectly preserved? The answer is an unqualified yes (1982, pp. 29-30).

In every case when the Bible's defenders refer to that Grand Book as being "inspired," they are by necessity referring to inspiration as it pertained to the original manuscripts (routinely referred to as "autographs"), since there is no such thing as an "inspired copy." "Aha!," the skeptic might say, "since you no longer possess those autographs, but only slightly flawed copies made by imperfect humans, that makes it impossible to know the truth of the message behind the text."

Try applying such a concept—that no longer being in personal possession of a perfect original makes knowing truth impossible—to matters of everyday life. Gleason Archer has done just that, using something as simple as a yardstick.

> It is wrong to affirm that the existence of a perfect original is a matter of no importance if that original is no longer available for examination. To take an example from the realm of engineering or of commerce, it makes a very great difference whether there is such a thing as a perfect measure for the meter, the foot, or the pound. It is questionable whether the yardsticks or scales used in business transactions or construction projects can be described as absolutely perfect. They may be almost completely conformable to the standard weights and measures preserved at the Bureau of Standards in our nation's capital but they are subject to error—however small. But how foolish it would be for any citizen to shrug his shoulders and say, "Neither you nor I have ever actually seen those standard measures in Washington; therefore we may as well disregard them—not be concerned about them at all—and simply settle realistically for the imperfect yardsticks and pound weights that we have available to us in everyday life." On the contrary, the existence of those measures in the Bureau of Standards is vital to the proper functioning of our entire economy. To the 222,000,000 Americans who have never seen them they are absolutely essential for the trustworthiness of all the standards of measurement that they resort to throughout their lifetime (1982, p. 28).

The fact that we do not possess the original autographs of the Bible in no way diminishes the usefulness, or authority, of the copies, any more than a construction superintendent not being in possession of the original measures from the Bureau of Standards diminishes the usefulness or authority of the devices he employs to erect a building. This point is made all the more evident when one considers the inconsequential nature of the vast majority of alleged discrepancies offered by skeptics as proof of the Bible's non-divine origin. Does not the "quality" of the "discrepancies" submitted to us by skeptics reveal just how desperate skepticism is to try to find **some** discrepancy—**any** discrepancy—within the Sacred Text? But to what end? As Archer noted:

> In fact, it has long been recognized by the foremost specialists in textual criticism that if any decently attested variant were taken up from the apparatus at the bottom of the page and were substituted for the accepted reading of the standard text, there would in no case be a single, significant alteration in doctrine or message (1982, p. 30).

Most Bible critics are completely indifferent to the principles of textual criticism. They disregard rules of interpretation, and treat the Bible differently than any other historical document. These skeptics assume that partial reports of an event are false reports, that figurative language must be interpreted literally, and that numbers always must be exact and never estimated. But the most frustrating truth for skeptics to accept involves copyists' errors. Even though textual critics in secular studies readily acknowledge such errors when studying the writings of historians like Josephus, Tacitus, or Seutonius, critics of the Bible hypocritically reject the explanations involving copyists' errors.

EXAMPLES OF COPYISTS' ERRORS

Who Killed Goliath? (2 Samuel 21:19; 1 Chronicles 20:5)

Some might be surprised to find out that an alleged contradiction hovers over one of the most famous battles to have ever taken place on the Earth—the clash between David and Goliath. Whereas, in 1 Samuel 17 the detailed record clearly shows that David defeated the defiant Philistine giant (Goliath), 2 Samuel 21:19 says that Goliath was killed by "**Elhanan**, the son of Jaare- oregim the Beth-lehemite" (ASV). Furthermore, 1 Chronicles 20:5 states that "Elhanan the son of Jair killed Lahmi **the brother of Goliath** the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam." So who actually killed Goliath? And how does Elhanan fit into all of this?

First, we must recognize that Jair and Jaareoregim are the same person. The widely quoted Albert Barnes noted that this difficulty may have begun when *oregim*, the Hebrew word translated "weaver" in this passage, ended up being placed on the wrong line by a copyist— something that has been known to happen in several instances (see Spence and Exell, 1978, 4:514). Therefore, Jair, combined with *oregim*, became *Jaare-oregim* in order to make it fit with proper Hebrew grammar.

Second, the phrase "Lahmi the brother of " is absent in 2 Samuel 21:19. [The King James Version inserts the phrase "the brother of " between "Bethlehemite" and "Goliath."] In the Hebrew, *eth Lachmi* (a combination of "Lahmi" and the term "brother") appears to have been changed into *beith hallachmi* (Beth-lehemite) in 2 Samuel 21:19. With this simple correction, the two texts would be in clear agreement (Clarke, 1996). In other words, **"the brother of" and the name "Lahmi" likely were mistakenly combined by a copyist to form what is translated in English as "Beth-lehemite" in 2 Samuel 21:19**. Thus, "the 2 Samuel 21 passage is a perfectly traceable corruption of the original wording, which fortunately has been correctly preserved in 1 Chronicles 20:5" (Archer, 1982, p. 179). A fair, in-depth examination of the alleged difficulty shows that there actually is no contradiction at all, but simply a copyist's mistake.

How Old Was Jehoiachin When He Began His Reign? (2 Kings 24:8; 2 Chronicles 36:9)

In 2 Kings 24:8, we read that Jehoiachin succeeded his father as the nineteenth king of Judah at the age of **eighteen**. 2 Chronicles 36:9 informs us that he was "**eight** years old when he became king." Fortunately there is enough additional information in the biblical text to prove the correct age of Jehoiachin when he began his reign over Judah.

There is little doubt that Jehoiachin began his reign at eighteen, not eight years of age. This conclusion is established by Ezekiel 19:5-9, where Jehoiachin appears as going up and down among the lions, catching the prey, devouring men, and knowing the widows of the men he devoured and the cities he wasted. As Keil and Delitzsch observed when commenting on this passage: "The knowing of widows cannot apply to a boy of eight, but might well be said of a young man of eighteen." Furthermore, it is doubtful that an eight-year child would be described as one having done "evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kings 24:9).

The simple answer to this "problem" is that a copyist, **not an inspired writer**, made a mistake. A scribe simply omitted a ten, which made Jehoiachin eight instead of eighteen. This does not mean the Bible had errors in the original autographs, but it does indicate that minor scribal errors have slipped into some copies of the Bible. [If you have ever seen the Hebrew alphabet, you no doubt recognize that the Hebrew letters (which were used for numbers) could be confused quite easily.]

Hadadezer or Hadarezer? (2 Samuel 8:3, 16, 19; 1 Chronicles 18:3; KJV and ASV)

This discrepancy obviously came about through the mistake of a scribe. It is very likely that Hadadezer (with a "d") is the true form since, "Hadad was the chief idol, or sun-god, of the Syrians" (Barnes, 1997; cf. Benhadad and Hadad of 1 Kings 15:18; 11:14; etc.). As William Arndt stated, "D and R may be distinct enough in appearance in English, but in Hebrew they are vexingly similar to each other" (1955, p. XV). There should be no doubt in our minds that Hadarezer simply is a corrupted form of Hadadezer. Surely, one can see how a copyist could easily have made this mistake.

When Did Absalom Commit Treason? (2 Samuel 15:7)

When David's son Absalom finally returned after killing his half-brother Amnon, Second Samuel 15 indicates that "after **forty years**" passed, Absalom left home again and committed treason. Anyone who knows much Israelite history quickly realizes that Absalom most certainly did not spend 40 years at home during this time, for David's entire reign was only 40 years (2 Samuel 5:4). The number given in 2 Samuel 15:7 probably should be **four years**,

which is more in keeping with the lifetime of Absalom, who was born in Hebron after David's reign as king began (2 Samuel 3:3). The number "four" also agrees with such ancient versions as the Septuagint, the Syriac, the Arabic, and the Vulgate. There is little question that the number "forty" represents a copyist error.

How Many Stalls did Solomon Have? (1 Kings 4:26; 2 Chronicles 9:25)

1 Kings 4:26 indicates that Solomon owned 40,000 stalls. However in 2 Chronicles 9:25 the number 4,000 is given. Both numbers obviously cannot be correct. Likely, respected biblical commentators Keil and Delitzsch were correct when they stated that the forty thousand figure in 1 Kings 4:26 "is an old copyist's error" (1996, p. 39). We learn elsewhere in the books of 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles that Solomon's chariots were but 1,400 (1 Kings 10:26; 2 Chronicles 1:14). It makes sense then that 40,000 horses could not possibly be required. In a way of comparison, Albert Barnes indicated that the "Assyrian chariots had at most three horses apiece, while some had only two. 4,000 [sic] horses would supply the full team of three to 1,200 and the smaller team of two to 2000 chariots" (1997). The four thousand figure appears to be the more probable of the two renderings.

IS THE OLD TESTAMENT STILL RELIABLE?

If there are scribal errors in today's copies of the Old Testament, many wonder how we can be certain the text of the Bible was transmitted faithfully across the centuries? Is it not possible that it was corrupted so that its form in our present Bible is drastically different from the original source?

The accuracy of the Old Testament text was demonstrated forcefully by the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls. Prior to 1947, the oldest Hebrew manuscripts of significant length did not date earlier than the ninth century A.D. However, when the Dead Sea scrolls were found (containing portions of all Old Testament books except Esther), this discovery pushed the record of the Old Testament text back almost 1,000 years. These copies were produced sometime between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100. One scroll found in the Qumran caves was of particular importance. It was a scroll of the book of Isaiah, which only had a few words missing. What was amazing about this scroll is that when it was compared to the text of Isaiah produced 900 years after it, the two matched almost word for word with only a few small variations. In commenting on this comparative reading of the two texts, A.W. Adams observed:

> The close agreement of the second Isaiah Scroll from the Dead Sea with the manuscripts of the ninth and tenth centuries shows how carefully the text tradition which they represent has been preserved.
>
> We may therefore be satisfied that the text of our Old Testament has been handed down in one line without serious change since the beginning of the Christian era and even before (as quoted by Kenyon, 1939, pp. 69,88).

Amazingly, a comparison of the standard Hebrew texts with that of the Dead Sea scrolls has revealed that the two are virtually identical. The variations (about 5%) occurred only in minor spelling differences and minute copyists' mistakes. Thus, as Rene Paché noted: "Since it can be demonstrated that the text of the old Testament was accurately transmitted for the last 2,000 years, one may reasonably suppose that it had been so transmitted from the beginning" (1971, p. 191).

Even within the various passages of Scripture, numerous references to copies of the written Word of God can be found. [It would be a gratuitous conclusion to assume that only one copy of the Scriptures existed during the period that the Old Testament covers.] A copy of the "book of the law" was preserved in the temple during the days of king Josiah (c. 621 B.C.), thus demonstrating that Moses' writings had been protected over a span of almost 1,000 years (2 Kings 22). Other Old Testament passages speak of the maintenance of the Holy Writings across the years (Jeremiah 36; Ezra 7:14; Nehemiah 8:1-18).

During Jesus' personal ministry, He read from the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue at Nazareth and called it "Scripture" (Luke 4:16-21)—a technical term always employed in the Bible for a **divine** writing! Jesus endorsed the truth that the Old Testament Scriptures had been preserved faithfully. Even though Jesus read from a **copy** of Isaiah, He still considered it the Word of God. Hence, Scripture had been preserved faithfully in the **written** record.

Furthermore, considering that even though Jesus condemned the scribes of His day for their many sins, not one instance in Scripture is it recorded where He even intimated they were unfaithful in their work as scribes. Yes, Jesus gave approval to copies (and translations—e.g., Septuagint) of the Old Testament by reading and quoting from them. We should do no less.

One of the great language scholars of the Old Testament text was Dr. Robert Dick Wilson (1856-1930). A master of over thirty-five languages, Wilson carefully compared the text of the Old Testament with inscriptions on ancient monuments (as these two sources dealt with common material). As a result of his research, he declared that "we are scientifically certain that we have substantially the same text that was in the possession of Christ and the apostles and, so far as anybody knows, the same as that written by the original composers of the Old Testament documents" (1929, p. 8).

For the believer, it is only logical to conclude that if a just God exists (Psalm 89:14; cf. 19:1), and He expects man to obey Him (Hebrews 5:8-9; John 14:15), then His Will must be preserved. Since man is amenable to God's religious and moral laws, it surely follows that God, through His providence, would preserve accurate copies of His divine Will in order that those who are created "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27) might be able to avoid the consequences of disobedience and have access to the wonderful blessings in Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Timothy 2:10). How could we do this if we did not have access to accurate copies of the Bible?

WHAT ABOUT THE RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?

How well do the New Testament documents compare with additional ancient, historical documents? F.F Bruce examined much of the evidence surrounding this question in his book, *The New Testament Documents—Are They Reliable?* As he and other writers (e.g., Metzger, 1968, p. 36; Geisler and Brooks, 1990, p. 159) have noted, there are 5,366 manuscripts of the Greek New Testament in existence today, in whole or in part, that serve to corroborate the accuracy of the New Testament. The best manuscripts of the New Testament are dated at roughly A.D. 350, with perhaps one of the most important of these being the Codex Vaticanus, "the chief treasure of the Vatican Library in Rome," and the Codex Sinaiticus, which was purchased by the British from the Soviet Government in 1933 (Bruce, 1953, p. 20). Additionally, the Chester Beatty papyri, made public in 1931, contain eleven codices (manuscript volumes), three of which contain most of the New Testament (including the gospels). Two of these codices boast of a date in the first half of the third century, while the third slides in a little later, being dated in the last half of the same century (Bruce, p. 21). The John Rylands Library boasts of even earlier evidence. A papyrus codex containing parts of John 18 dates to the time of Hadrian, who reigned from A.D. 117 to 138 (Bruce, p. 21).

Other attestation to the accuracy of the New Testament documents can be found in the writings of the so-called "apostolic fathers"—men who wrote primarily from A.D. 90 to 160, and often quoted from the New Testament documents (Bruce, p. 22). Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Tatian, Clement of Rome, and Ignatius (writing before the close of the second century) all provided citations from one or more of the gospels (Guthrie, 1990, p. 24). Other witnesses to authenticity of the New Testament are the Ancient Versions, which consist of the text of the New Testament translated into different languages. The Old Latin and the Old Syriac are the most ancient, being dated from the middle of the second century (Bruce, p. 23).

The fact is, the New Testament enjoys far more historical documentation than any other volume ever known. Compared to the 5,366 Greek manuscripts "backing" the New Testament, there are only 643 copies of Homer's *Iliad*, which is undeniably the most famous book of ancient Greece. No one doubts the text of Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, but we only have 10 copies of it, the earliest of which was made 1,000 years after it was written. We have only two manuscripts of Tacitus' *Histories and Annals*, one from the ninth century and one from the eleventh. The *History of Thucydides*, another well-known ancient work, is dependent upon only eight manuscripts, the oldest of these being dated about A.D. 900 (along with a few papyrus scraps dated at the beginning of the Christian era). And *The History of Herodotus* finds itself in a similar situation. "Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest MSS of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals" (Bruce, pp. 20-21). Bruce thus declared: "It is a curious fact that historians have often been much readier to trust the New Testament records than have many theologians" (p. 19). In 1968, Bruce Metzger, a longtime professor of New Testament language and literature at Princeton,

stated: "The amount of evidence for the text of the New Testament…is so much greater than that available for any ancient classical author that the necessity of resorting to emendation is reduced to the smallest dimensions" (1968, p. 86). Truly, to have such abundance of copies for the New Testament from within seventy years of their writing is nothing short of amazing (Geisler and Brooks, 1990, pp. 159-160).

The available evidence makes it clear that the New Testament has been transmitted accurately over the past 2,000 years with relatively few variations. Consider this: Since the King James Version was first translated (in 1611) and revised (one of the latest revisions taking place in 1769), several manuscripts came to light that were older than those used in the KJV translation. When these manuscripts were compared and contrasted with those used in the translation of the KJV, the Greek text used in its translation was seen to be essentially sound. Although the translators of the American Standard Version (published in 1901) had access to more ancient Greek manuscripts than did the KJV translators, the ASV differs very little from the KJV. And since most differences are seen only in the matter of vocabulary choices, someone reading from the KJV has no difficulty listening to a person reading from the ASV. The truth is, if the English language was not constantly changing, there would not be a need for more translations of the Bible. We can be confident that we have accurate copies of the New Testament today—a fact attested to by more than 5,000 manuscripts of the Greek New Testament.

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